

reinventing red

HOTSHOT WINEMAKERS RESCUE

CHILE'S REPUTATION

BY ERICA DUECY



➤ AS SKIERS ARE FASTENING THE BUCKLES ON THEIR BOOTS in the northern hemisphere, winemakers in Chile are hiking through the foothills of the Andes and the Coastal Range, tending to their crops of ripening grapes. It is an annual tradition, and one that is of growing interest to wine connoisseurs the world over, as more and more Chilean vintners transform their harvest into top-shelf wines that — owing to the unique characteristics of their mountainous origins — make ideal holiday gifts for wine-loving peak baggers and ski bunnies. And they're a spot-on selection for drinking around the fire with friends after a day on the slopes.

In recent years, investors have pumped money and resources into Chile's wineries, hoping to capitalize on an opportunity to create wines rivaling the world's best. Winemakers have pushed outward from the central valleys, finding new sites to grow their grapes, experimenting with Chile's signature varietal, carmenère, and developing their own style of deep red blends.

Their efforts are beginning to bear fruit, yielding sexy, statuesque, intriguing bottles that beg to be savored on a cold winter

night. These “icon” wines range from lusty cabernet sauvignons to silky bordeaux-inspired blends to flirty pinot noirs.*

Chile’s superpremium bottles, which retail at \$50 or more, are becoming something of a sommeliers’ secret weapon. “They really are an excellent value,” says Adam Seger, general manager and wine director at Chicago’s upscale modern-Latin restaurant Nacional 27. “Especially at the higher end, I’ve found that I’m able to offer one of the top Chilean reds for half the price of a California wine of comparable quality and intensity. If you like that Napa meritage, this Chilean cabernet is going to deliver even more for even less money.”

Chile is largely known for the quaffable bargain bottles that make it the fourth-largest source of U.S. wine imports (after Italy, Australia, and France). In 2007 the U.S. imported 6.6 million cases of Chilean wine, a 13 percent increase over the previous year. It’s a remarkable feat considering that the country’s export wine business didn’t exist 20 years ago.

Among those paving the way for top-shelf wines is Aurelio Montes, co-founder and chief winemaker at Viña Montes Winery in the Colchagua Valley, who makes more than a dozen award-winning wines from vineyards in two appellations. When we started in 1987,” he says, “we knew that there was huge potential — the

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climate, the soil, the proximity to the ocean — to produce outstanding wines.” While other vintners focused on inexpensive wines, Montes strove for greater heights. “People called us crazy when we developed the Alpha range, because everyone said \$20 Chilean wines were too expensive,” he recalls. “But now look: We’re creating icon wines like Purple Angel and Folly that are successful at \$80 retail.”

It’s not always easy for Chilean wines to gain respect, especially at an elevated price point. “Any time you’re spending \$100 you have so many choices,” says Jesse Salazar, wine director at New York’s Union Square Wines. “When you could get an amazing wine from Burgundy or Bordeaux, why go to Chile?” But he concedes that “there’s actually a lot of interesting wine coming out of Chile. People are trying to find wines that have a sense of place, and Chile didn’t really offer that for the longest time. I think you’ll start to see that changing.”

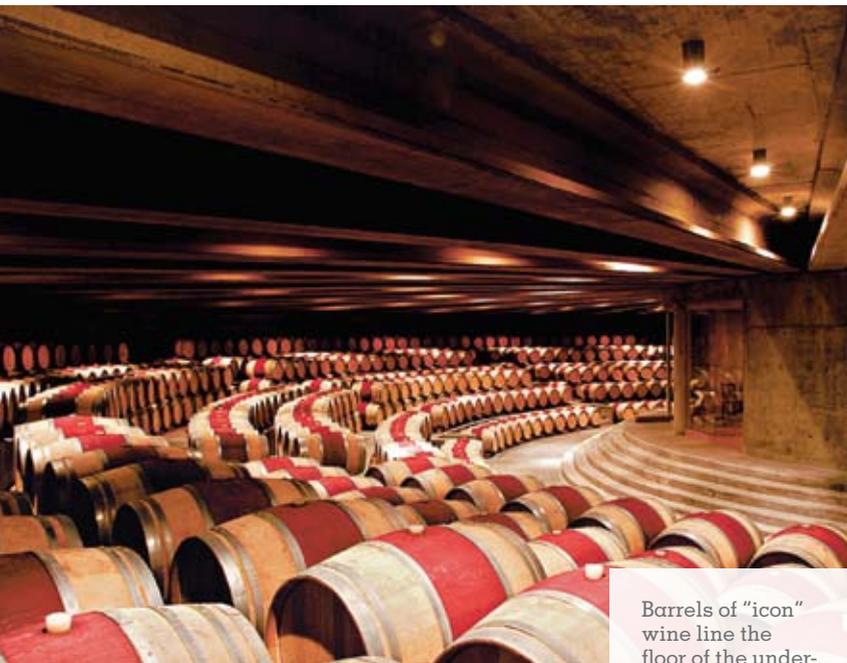
Carmenère in particular has helped Chilean wine develop a unique identity. This “lost” variety, one of Bordeaux’s six noble grapes, now grows only in Chile. When phylloxera hit France in the 1850s the aphid-like pests killed off most of France’s carmenère grapes, hobbling Europe’s wine industry, but Chilean landowners had already shipped vine cuttings to Chile, where the unaffected plants thrived. Today, “carmenère is a really

hot grape,” says Jorge Arias, sommelier at the Brazilian steakhouse Churrascaria Plataforma in New York. “Our customers are excited about it, and it goes really well with the type of food we serve. “It’s fruity, spicy, and full-bodied — perfect for grilled steak.”

Chile’s mountainous landscape also imparts a distinctive sense of terroir: Its 2,700 miles of peaks and valleys run from the Atacama Desert south to Patagonia’s glacial terrain, from Pacific Ocean beaches to the towering Andes Mountains in the east. Matetic Vineyards, based in San Antonio Valley, has planted on steep slopes to capitalize on this. “Producing wines from a mountainous landscape is fascinating because every block in the vineyard will have different characteristics given by the exposure to the sun, the altitude, the soil composition, and the effects of the wind,” says head winemaker Paula Cárdenas. “That could give you the perfect tool to produce complex wines.”

Elsewhere, Casa Lapostolle operates three estates in three different appellations to take advantage of Chile’s myriad elevations and conditions. Founded in 1994 by the Chilean Rabat family and the French Marnier-Lapostolle family, the winery employs Chilean winemaker Andrea León and Michel Rolland, a renowned consultant from Bordeaux, to develop wines like its celebrated Clos Apalta, a luscious blend of carmenère, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and petit verdot.

León anticipates a wine-growing land rush in the coming years. “Chile is quite an unexplored area if you compare it to California or Europe,” she says. “There are plenty of different little micro-valleys just starting to be explored. We have a lot of freedom and a new generation of winemakers who are willing to take risks and make something new, who have something to say. Now the challenge is making wines that can compete alongside the best in the world.”



Barrels of “icon” wine line the floor of the underground cellar at Viña Montes’ Apalta Estate.